

Travel

GECKO FABULOUS

Rule your own island in the Philippines for a week

Tom Adair

Had I fallen in love? On Ariara, a bejeweled, conical speck of jungle-green — one of hundreds of scattered islands south-west of Manila, the mainland capital of the Philippines — I was wilting. It was easy to be beguiled by the silken waves of the Sula Sea, the long golden beach, the elegant

coconut palms, a blue sky upon which lay scribbled a streamer of cloud. But no, it was Gloria — soft-throated Gloria — I was falling for, quite hopelessly.

She seduced me the night before while I unpacked, oh that sonorous gurgle. 'Ah... a gecko!' said Charles McCulloch, the island's owner, who had arrived to show me around my bungalow. A dragonfly buzzed at the shower-head. We quietly marvelled at the bathtub, carved from a single slab of marble. Outside, the hillside emitted the insect crackle of dusk. Gloria ululated softly. →

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TRAVEL



Next morning I swung on a wicker bucket seat under a fig tree above the beach, counting the islands I could see. I watched them as I swayed. I must have resembled something from a typical holiday snap. But nothing here was typical. That was the point.

The Ariara deal, uniquely, is that at all times you call the shots. The place is yours for exclusive use — you and a party of up to 18 people take the whole island for your own. 'You are a house guest,' says Carrie McCulloch, Charles's wife. 'Eat when you wish. Sleep when you want to.' The grand central lodge, with glass-fronted dining room and lounge, was flanked by bungalows and opulent jungle villas, built for seclusion. Everything on the menu, from overnight trips on the air-conditioned trimaran *Karen-Joy*, to adventure diving to fishing or massage, was here for the taking. Just click your fingers.

Spoiled for choice, I raced into the tropical warmth of the sea, through the gentle waves along the beachfront. In the deeper waters, domes of coral rolled on the bot-

tom, a slipstream of fish like silver darts no bigger than whitebait clustered around me, hyphens of light.

'They'll be dilis,' said Charles over lunch, 'taking shelter from bigger beasts.' One of these 'beasts' was yellowtail tuna, which, served with salad and sweet potato chips, was delicious. The rosé wine lulled me towards sleep and that afternoon I sprawled on the deck of the *Karen-Joy* while my fellow trippers stretched near the bow.

An hour later we reached flat calm, in a bay off Linapacan, a large island to the south, disembarking to wade towards a straggle of rickety huts where the locals, surrounded by squawking chickens, a bloated pig, and a rooster with attitude, watched us and smiled.

Skinny women nursed saucer-eyed babies. Laughing children piled inside the flimsy fishing boats to pose for us, raising hands to receive Carrie's gifts.

We climbed the hill towards our destination. Time — historical time — can easily fall though the cracks when you holiday on

GETTING THERE

Audley Travel (www.audleytravel.com; 01993 838 000) offers seven nights on Ariara Island from £2,250 per person (based on 18 guests), including international flights with Cathay Pacific via Hong Kong, domestic flights from Manila and boat transfers to the island. This includes private use of the entire island and its staff plus all meals, all watersports (including use of the 100ft trimaran, 33ft speedboat, two jetskis, dive boat, RIB, kayaks, windsurfers, waterskis, fishing and snorkelling equipment) and two dives per week

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a tropical island paradise. Barefoot tourist time becomes everything.

Up the steep track, over slippery roots, we trudged slowly towards darkening leafy gloom, and there it was. A ruined fortress, built by Filipino slaves for Spanish masters 400 years ago. Fallen slabs and leaning trees now hemmed it in. Clambering over the tumbling battlements, the interior revealed itself as a tangle of tilting trees strangely like stubbed-out cigarettes in an ashtray. There was no birdsong. Green nature had colonised the place.

That night I lay on a bean bag and planned my coming circumnavigation of Ariara in a kayak. Charles had also promised me a jetski ride. All around me, in its finery, was sipping of night was interrupted only by sipping. 'Name your poison,' someone said. 'Margarita or G&T?' — as we limbered up for a barbecue banquet, some of the ingredients which had been swimming peacefully across the lagoon that morning.

After the party Gloria woke me at 3 a.m. She'd been abandoned to eat mosqui-

toes and she wasn't impressed. We played the gurgle game: in the bathroom I filled a basin. Pulled the plug. Gloria sang. Outside, the wind rose. Gloria quietened. From my window I watched as white-topped waves crossed the reef like lines of print scrolling down a page. I pictured sea turtles, coral, anemones, swaying beneath the storm.

Next morning a dive party took off for a wreck dive around a second world war supply ship. I took to the hill. Joshua, in his Ariara T-shirt, machete gleaming, hacked us upward. Like all the staff, his charm was equalled by his efficiency. His assistant was Rachel. It might take them both to carry me all the way down again, I thought, as we stood among pitcher plants at the summit. Below us lay islands on a crystalline sea, and the little dive boat zigzagged around.

The divers told me what I'd missed — angel fish, clown fish, the brilliance of coral. I played my ace: a giant water-monitor lizard spotted near rocks over which I'd absailed back to base. They shrugged. I planned to tell Gloria. She'd be impressed.

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Kowloon
00 852 3717 2222
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MANDARIN ORIENTAL
5 Connaught Road, Central
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THE UPPER HOUSE
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